Interview w/MirrorMediaGroup (Claire Ko, Mirror Books) 4/23/13

1. "What kind of person is Sidney Rittenberg?" The audience should decide for itself, based on his life and what he has to say in the film. But I'll say this: he is a complicated figure who during the course of his life made decisions that many of us would not have made. Some of those decisions were understandable and some were not. But importantly, he bears witness to Mao's historical role and to events that have all but been removed from public discourse in China, including two of the most catastrophic events of the 20th-century: the Great Leap Forward which caused an unprecedented man-made famine in which an estimated 35-50 million people died, and the Cultural Revolution which tore apart both Chinese society and the Chinese Communist Party and took an enormous toll in death and destruction. You won't find references in China, not in published books, or films, or in museums or on the internet to the magnitude of these events, and this film cannot be shown publicly in China today. Yet, they are essential to understanding China today.

2. I don't pretend to have a definitive answer to this question. I think Sidney's decision to stay in China during and after his first imprisonment is explained in part by his determination to prove to himself and to China's leaders that he was worthy of a cause in which he believed. He was a "true believer". For him to quit would have been an admission that he was wrong and "a failure".

3. As Sidney explains it, the China he found after leaving prison the second time, in 1978, was not the China he had known before his arrest in 1968. The shift to self-interest and consumerism, the signs of corruption, and widespread disillusionment with the party caused by the cultural revolution all were factors, I believe.

4. If you mean by this, how much is he still influenced by party policies and programs today, it is sometimes hard to say. He says in the film that he was "in total delusion about what was happening or what was possible in China" during the cultural revolution. He says he abandoned his belief in Marxism-Leninism, and he is not uncritical of Mao. But I think it's fair to say that he has not abandoned his belief or his hope in the revolution or in the Chinese Communist Party. As for what is happening or possible in China today, Sidney and I ~~do~~ are not always ~~agree on that~~ in agreement.

5. As you may know, I brought to this story a considerable background both in the study of China and in reporting about China and U.S.-China relations, including the films "Misunderstanding China", "Shanghai", "Looking for Mao" and "China After Tiananmen" (made either for CBS NEWS or for PBS). Every source, every encounter usually helps to broaden our understanding. If you believe in the documentary film as journalism, as I do, then there are many reasons for making this film. Among them are to tell stories that otherwise will not be heard; the opportunity to address the historical record, to expand our understanding of history; the need to connect the past to the present, the relevance of the story in today's world. This is as true for understanding America as it is for understanding China , and these all were reasons to make this film.

6. The most interesting things we learned are, we hope, in the film or as much as you can include in a 90-minute documentary which must also provide a historical and political context for a general audience that may have no frame of reference for the subject, especially one as complex as China.

7. The editing decisions, what to use and what to leave out and how it all fits together, may be the toughest challenge for any reporter or documentary filmmaker. Inevitably, you cannot use everything you think should be included. But decisions often have to do with the need to tell a coherent story that is as true to the subject as possible. It is a process of working and re-working the material available to you. It is as simple and as difficult as that. But we bring no agenda to the subject; we want the film, as much as possible, to speak for itself. In the American journalistic tradition, Mr. Rittenberg was not part of this process or in any other way involved in the production. He did not see the film or any part of it until it was finished and shown publicly.

8. I'll share this one with you: at the end of four interviews over a five-year period, after hours of questions, of pushing and prodding and pursuing the history and events of the Maoist Era, I asked: "Sidney, do you have any questions of us?" He said: "Yes. When do we eat?"

9. The biggest obstacle to making an independent documentary film, aside from access, is raising money. The fund-raising never stops and each step along the way you have to raise more. It also affects what you can spend, or not spend, on archival materials, music and all other aspects of production. It can be a tortuous process which only leads to another one: getting the finished film seen by as many people as possible.

10. I think there are a great many things that an audience can take from this film. One is to understand the limits of the foreigner's influence on events in distant countries whose history, culture and politics are very different from our own --- a lesson that is always learned the hard way, and too often forgotten. There is a need to confront history, to understand the past and how it connects to the present, which is just as true in America and elsewhere as it is in China.

This film is very much a meditation on history. Sidney reflects on aspects of his experience that we should be paying close attention to when we consider China today: the corruption of power; the idea that if a society is not safe for everyone, it isn't safe for anyone; and that the problem is not just of good men and bad men, but is systemic. As is being debated among many in China today, if the system doesn't change --- without fundamental reforms --- then nothing changes. Sidney Rittenberg's story reflects these issues. His life speaks to the fallacy of ideological certainty, no matter where you find it.